WASHINGTON - Although health information technology has demonstrated the ability to dramatically improve the quality and safety of patient care, few small medical providers can afford to implement these technologies because of financial, legal, and technical barriers. Health care providers told the Subcommittee on Regulation, Health Care and Trade of the House Small Business Committee that federal investment and leadership are necessary to ensure that health information technology reaches the vast majority of patients who receive care from a small practice.

"We have already seen the transformational effect information technology has on the practice of medicine. Now, those improvements must be made at all levels-from large city hospitals to rural solo practitioners-so that health IT's benefits can be fully realized by all Americans," said subcommittee Chairman Charles Gonzalez.

Despite a recent upsurge in the promotion of electronic health records (EHR) and health IT at all levels of government, adoption has been slow, particularly among smaller practices, as only 13 percent of solo practitioners have used an EHR. Since solo practitioners comprise about two-thirds of all medical practices, their failure to adopt this technology presents a serious obstacle to widely disseminating health IT's benefits. Broad implementation of health IT has the ability to not only improve clinical practice and patient outcomes, but to connect patients and physicians across an information infrastructure and improve population health by expanding capabilities in research, monitoring, and measurement.

Appearing before the subcommittee, physicians described the lack of incentives for small providers to invest in health IT systems. Purchasing and installing an EHR system can be very expensive-more than $32,000 per physician. While that system will no doubt lead to better patient outcomes, increased quality of care does not translate into financial gain that would allow providers to recoup their costs, much less provide an incentive to undertake the project. A report by the General Accounting Office (GAO) also shows that concerns about increased exposure to legal liability and compliance costs make providers wary of implementing the new technologies. Small providers, who are already less able to handle legal and regulatory burdens, are less inclined to risk further exposure.   Providers also noted that worries about easy of use, interoperability with other providers, and the eventual obsolesce of expensive technology.

"Providers have legitimate costs concerns about adding health IT to their practices, but this technology is too important to patient care and public health not to be in every office. As

many patients learned when their records were lost or destroyed after Hurricane Katrina, paper records are just too vulnerable." said Chairman Gonzalez. "This committee will work with providers to help them integrate this technology into their practices in way that improves the way they do business."

"Just as government investment has catalyzed research in a wide range of industries, incentives are needed in the health care industry to spur adoption of these technologies that provide such broad public health benefits," Gonzalez added.   At the hearing, providers addressed a number of proposals to deliver investment, including tax incentives, increased Medicare and Medicaid provider payments, and the creation of state loan pools. Providers also emphasized the importance of addressing regulatory barriers and creating reasonable standardization measures.

"Today's discussion demonstrates that action is needed to ensure that all patients receive the benefits of health IT," said Chairman Gonzalez. "To achieve this, I will be introducing legislation providing incentives and financial assistance for small providers that will give them access to the best technology available."

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